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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: CHAVISTAS SEE REGIONAL ELECTIONS AS DE FACTO
REFERENDUM

REF: A. CARACAS 1083

[1](#)B. CARACAS 1054

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor,
for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Pro-Chavez political parties registered their candidates in March in anticipation of the August 1 elections for governors and mayors. As with the opposition, the Chavistas see the regional elections as a referendum of sorts on President Hugo Chavez. They also see the elections as an opportunity to extend the Bolivarian Revolution further into the state and local level. Chavez's campaign committee imposed discipline over the candidate selection process, which resulted in consensus candidates in most races. Chavez's personal selection of many gubernatorial candidates, many of whom are ex-military officers, rankled some supporters. Chavistas, wanting to distract from the presidential recall referendum, have already accused the USG of meddling in the regional elections. End Summary.

The De Facto Referendum

[1](#)2. (C) Pro-Chavez political parties, under the leadership of a campaign committee called the "Comando Ayacucho," finished registering their candidates in March for regional elections for governors, mayors, and other state and municipal officials (ref a). For Chavez supporters, the regional elections represent the political battleground of 2004. Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) National Director of Ideology Elias Jaua told DCM and poloff March 30 that the elections will serve as a type of referendum on President Chavez, in which races will be decided by candidates' devotion to Chavez's so-called Bolivarian Revolution. The elections are a more stable vehicle for expressing popular will, Jaua argued, than the proposed presidential recall referendum. Jaua asserted that Chavez would win such a vote, but that the opposition, unable to accept the bitter truth of defeat, would plunge Venezuela into a Colombia-like conflict.

Elections Strengthen the Revolution

[1](#)3. (U) A propaganda booklet on the elections written by Jaua in February emphasizes the importance of the regional elections to the revolutionary process. The booklet says the fate of the revolution will be determined by the elections. "Hegemony in macro-social spaces" is not enough, says the booklet, for ensuring the revolution succeeds. State and local positions are closer to the daily life of "the people" and are vital to "decentralizing democracy," the literature says. Surrendering even one of these spaces to the opposition, claims the propaganda, will permit them to plan "coups, regicides, and sabotage" against the revolution. The booklet also points out that a Chavista electoral win will demonstrate to the world that the GOV has the support of the majority of Venezuelans, which will help the revolutionary government in its international efforts to alleviate poverty, achieve regional integration, and defeat the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Strategy: Gains and Punishment

[1](#)4. (U) Comando Ayacucho leader Willian Lara (MVR) told reporters March 26 the principal objective of the pro-Chavez parties is to hold on to and add to the 16 of 23 governorships and 126 of 335 mayoralalties already held by Chavistas. Lara highlighted the need to "recapture" the positions lost to "traitors," those who have defected from

Chavismo, specifically, the governors of Anzoategui and Bolivar, and the metropolitan mayor of Caracas. The MVR electoral booklet discusses important issues for the campaign. Most emphasized are Chavez's social programs aimed at the poor, such as Mission Robinson (literacy), Barrio Adentro (health), and Mission Ribas (education). On the "tough issues" of unemployment, crime, corruption, and political violence, members are encouraged to remind voters that the Bolivarian movement is best equipped to deal with these problems, but has been hindered thus far by "sabotage" from the opposition.

Candidate Selection: Chavez's Big Finger

15. (C) Jaua said the Comando Ayacucho had succeeded in single candidates in every state except Trujillo, where a rogue MVR candidate registered against the consensus candidate (Note: The press reported several conflicts among pro-Chavez candidates, most of which were resolved by the time the candidate registration period closed on March 25). Jaua said this was much improved over the last elections, when multiple pro-Chavez candidates faced off in several key contests. The Comando Ayacucho's technique included public warnings to any maverick candidates that they would be "automatically excluded" from their respective party if they went against the decision of the Comando.

16. (C) MVR National Assembly Deputy Ibrain Velazquez shared his frustration over candidate selection with poloff on March 26. Velazquez, who was reportedly snubbed by Chavez for the candidacy of his state of Nueva Esparta, predicted that the Comando's heavy hand would result in unexpected electoral upsets (see para 7). Velazquez said bluntly that there was no candidate selection process, saying that "Chavez is the only one who decides." Chavez, in fact, has announced many of the candidacies personally, often surprising those not selected -- and some who are. Chavez picks are often ex-military officials. One columnist pointed out that, if the GOV candidates sweep the elections, ten states would be governed by former military officials.

Critical Races

17. (C) The disgruntled Velazquez asserted that opposition strength is growing. He thought it possible the Chavistas could lose the races in the states of Nueva Esparta, , Cojedes, Zulia, Bolivar, and Vargas. He was more sure of victories in the states of Aragua and Carabobo. Jaua admitted the Chavistas would face an uphill battle in Miranda, where former Minister of Infrastructure Diosdado Cabello is running against Governor Enrique Mendoza, the head of the opposition's Coordinadora Democratica. Jaua believes Acosta Carles stands a better than even chance at beating Henrique Salas Feo in Carabobo. Both Jaua and Velazquez were confident of a win in Caracas, where a three-cornered contest may give the win to MVR's Juan Barreto. Jaua said the opposition was favored in the states of Zulia, Apure, and Yaracuy.

Running Against the U.S.

18. (U) Jorge Alborno, Secretary General of the pro-Chavez Patria Para Todos (PPT) told reporters March 26 that the USG is coordinating the opposition's electoral strategy. Alborno accused the USG of imposing the candidacies of Enrique Mendoza and Henrique Salas Feo on the opposition. The MVR electoral booklet also claims that the opposition, having lost the fight domestically, has gone to its international "masters" to beg for intervention in the country.

Comment

19. (C) As Chavez is apparently convinced that the nationalist card has some value, we expect Chavez and his followers to step up the anti-U.S. rhetoric to divert attention from the dreary Venezuelan political and social conditions, hardly improved after five years of Chavez rule. (In fact, recent polling shared with the Ambassador indicates that Chavez supporters do not approve of the anti-U.S. posture.) Regional elections also distract the public and political parties from the presidential recall vote, which poses significantly greater political risk to the revolution. The elections, as both sides have suggested to us, may size up to be a referendum on President Chavez.

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